

## SANDHILL CRANES IN IOWA

Prior to European settlement of Iowa, Sandhill Cranes probably were a common nesting species and abundant migrants. As early as 1820, Edwin James saw large flocks of cranes migrating north along the Missouri River in Harrison County. Even in the 1890's, it was not uncommon to see flocks of hundreds or even thousands of cranes in Winnebago and Hancock Counties in spring. Although there are few specific records, Sandhill Cranes probably were fairly common nesters in north-central and northwest Iowa. With settlement, the combination of unregulated hunting and loss of nesting habitat led to a rapid disappearance of nesting cranes from Iowa. The last Sandhill Crane nesting of that era was at the headwaters of the Iowa River near Hayfield in Hancock County in May 1894. As was common in those days, the eggs were taken for an egg collection.

Cranes nest in shallow wetlands with dense vegetation. They create a nest mound by pulling up marsh plants and laying one to three eggs that hatch in late spring. About three months after hatching the young begin to fly, but the brownish-colored young remain with their parents throughout their first winter. Cranes eat waste grain, seeds, berries, roots, tubers, snakes, frogs, crayfish, worms and insects.

By the early 1900s, even migrating Sandhill Cranes were rare in Iowa. For the next 60 years, there are very few reports of cranes in Iowa. Throughout the Midwest, problems similar to Iowa's caused Sandhill Crane populations to dwindle. Just a few dozen pairs remained in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan through the 1940s. During the 1970s and 1980s,

however, nesting populations increased in the northern states, and a few migrating sandhills were seen in Iowa.

The number of Sandhill Cranes reported in Iowa increased greatly in the late 1970s and 1980s (Dinsmore 1989), culminating in their return as a nesting species. Nesting birds derive from populations in Wisconsin, which increased greatly in the 1970s and 1980s (Robbins 1992) and eventually spilled over into Iowa. These birds winter in Florida and Georgia. The huge flocks that gather in central Nebraska nest in the Arctic. Those flocks are probably the source of most cranes seen in western Iowa (Kent and Dinsmore 1996).

In 1992, after a 98-year absence, Sandhill Cranes successfully nested in Iowa at Otter Creek Wildlife Management Area in Tama County. Two colts were produced. In 1993, cranes also attempted to nest at a second area at Green Island along the Mississippi River in Jackson County, however due to annual flooding, young were not produced at that site until 1997. In the mean time cranes at Sweet Marsh became established and successfully nested, beginning in 1994. The Sweet Marsh flock has grown to include four other sites in Bremer Co.

In 2002, Sandhill Cranes were observed in four new sites. Reports were received of cranes sited in Clinton and Chickasaw County. Allamakee County picked up another site where young were produced and in western Iowa, young were produced in Woodbury County. Cranes have been included in bird counts in at least 16 counties during the year.

In 2003 unison calling between adults increased to 27 pairs around the state. There were 95 known sightings and fifteen documented young around the state. Dr. Jim Dinsmore provided a sightings file that included a number of counties where cranes were seen in recent years.

In Boone County a nesting pair had wintered at a farmstead south of Madrid. The pair performed nesting courtship displays and created a nest in

the farmyard. Two eggs were laid in the spring. In April the nest and eggs were destroyed. Raccoons or dogs were suspected. In June a Sandhill Crane carcass was discovered in the vicinity of the nest near powerlines. The fate of this unconventional pair is unknown.

Figure 14.1 Iowa counties with sightings and known reproduction of Sandhill cranes 1987-2003.

## Sandhill Cranes in Iowa, 2003

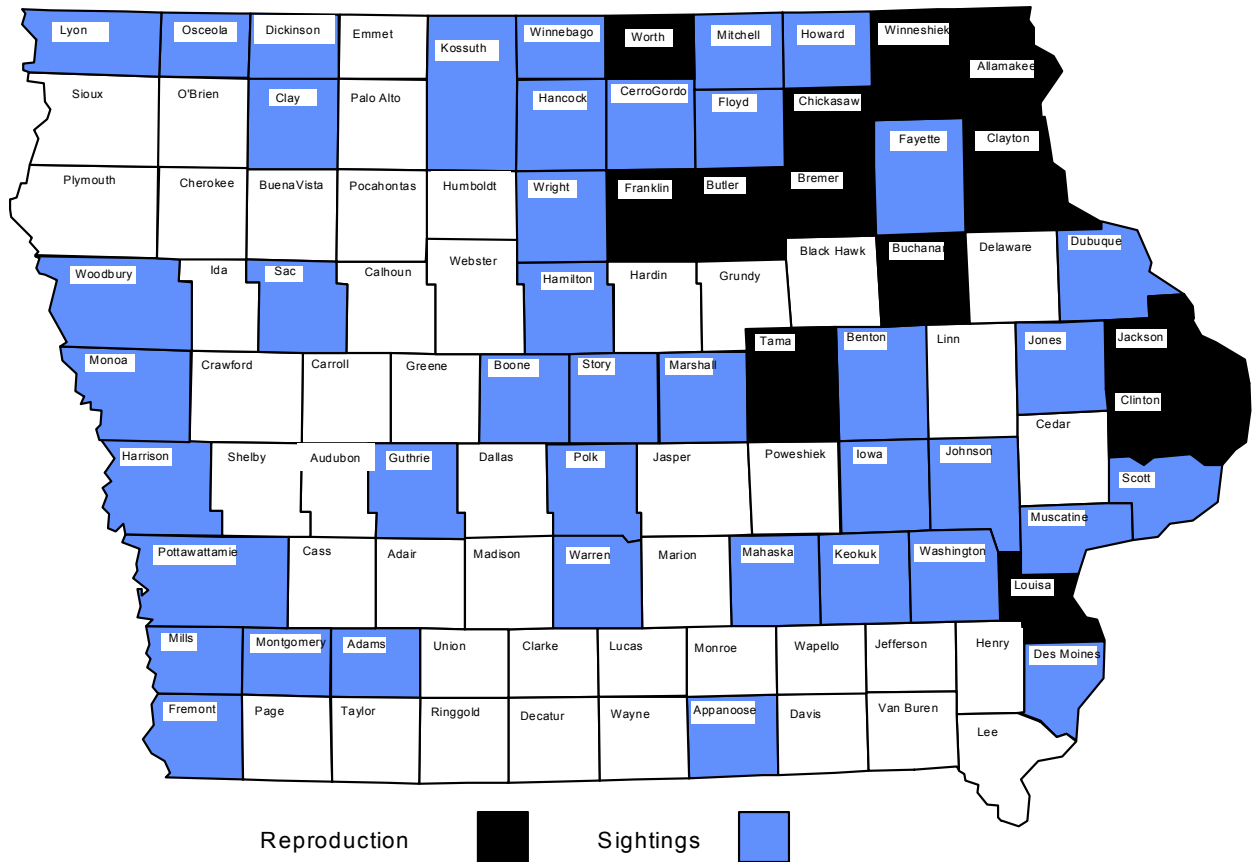


Figure 14.2 Number of Sandhill cranes observed during April surveys and independent reports of reproduction.

